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Viewing cable 09SOFIA362, BULGARIA: NEW CHOD, OLD MINDSET

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09SOFIA362	2009-07-07 08:56	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Sofia

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.bivol.bg/wlarmy.html>

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SOFIA 000362

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/01/2029

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SUBJECT: BULGARIA: NEW CHOD, OLD MINDSET

Classified By: Ambassador McEldowney for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The nomination of Simeon Simeonov as Chief of Defense (CHOD) is a testament to the lack of appetite for serious reform. In his previous position as Commander of the Air Force, Air Force modernization lagged far behind the

other services. A classic, myopic bureaucrat, he stifled innovation, failed to effectively leverage joint training opportunities with the United States and was unable to secure funds for his pilots to reach NATO standards for flight hours. He was routinely chastised for poor performance by the Minister of Defense.

12. (C) Simeonov's promotion was due largely to his close relationship with the President's Chief of Staff, Nikola Kolev (himself a former CHOD and Air Force Commander.) Kolev, and perhaps President Parvanov himself, seek to maintain control over the direction and speed of reform inside the MOD, by placing a malleable friend at the helm. The new CHOD fits this description, as do several other appointments controlling key nodes of the ministry, such as the new Inspector General and Joint Operations Commander, who both lack competence and integrity. The full list of senior promotions included a few bright spots, such as several IMET graduates and good embassy contacts, but the ability of these talented reformers will be limited by the dead weight now piled on top of them. END SUMMARY.

13. (C) The nomination of Simeonov for a three-year term as the new CHOD elicited groans throughout the international defense community in Sofia. Widely perceived as a failure in his previous position, the appointment was criticized in the media and scoffed at privately by Bulgarian career military officials. Defense Minister Tsonev made a statement to the press distancing himself from the decision and implying the responsibility for the nomination rested solely with the President. Technically, the nomination must come from MOD, be approved by the Council of Ministers and signed by the President, but in practice the Presidency is in a position to dictate in advance which candidates it finds acceptable. The Minister, whose own career is now uncertain following national elections, was not willing to directly challenge the President's choice, but took the opportunity to swipe at the new CHOD in public, saying that he hoped Simeonov could accomplish as CHOD many of the key Air Force reform priorities he failed to achieve as Air Force Commander.

14. (C) Two other appointments of concern are LTG Atanas Samandov as Joint Operations Commander and Major General Volodya Tsvetanov as the Chief Inspector. Samandov, who will be in charge of all Bulgarian military operations, including overseas missions in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan, is not considered to be a top-performer and has been widely rumored to be involved in corrupt defense acquisition deals. Tsvetanov is a disturbing choice as Inspector General since he is also widely considered to be corrupt, and is the brother (with a different surname) of disgraced former Bulgarian Interior Minister Rumen Petkov, who resigned last year in a scandal over his links to organized crime. As part of the personnel moves, the previous Deputy CHOD VADM Lyutskanov and Joint Operations Commander LTG Pehlivanov, two close and constructive partners were removed from their positions, a deep net loss.

15. (C) Not all of the 30 or so general officer appointments were bad. Most were acceptable given the seniority and performance of the officers promoted. Four of the nominations are particularly good news, since they include smart, energetic reformers with international experience such as participation in IMET programs: Maj Gen Rumen Radev as Deputy Chief of the Air Force, BG Stefan Yanev as MOD Director of Security and Defense Policy, Maj Gen Konstantin Popov as Air Force Commander and RADM Plamen Manushev as Naval Forces Commander. We can expect continued support and cooperation from this group, but their ability to stimulate bottom-up reform will be limited as their superiors, particularly the new CHOD, will be able to stifle any moves contrary to their interests.

16. (C) COMMENT: Despite our concern over three of the top appointments, the new crop of senior military officers will not prevent us from advancing our bilateral security agenda with Bulgaria. In practice, the Bulgarian Defense Staff (previously called the General Staff) are policy implementers not policy makers, so even the CHOD will not be able to

countermand clear political decisions on issues such as deployments to Afghanistan. The troubling appointments represent a missed opportunity and demonstrate the unconstructive influence of the President and his staff, who

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have not challenged crooked procurements (and likely benefited from them) or vigorously supported real reform. Progress on planning, training and procurement reform will depend on the next Defense Minister who will need to battle with the entrenched interests of the Presidency and its allies. We will continue to work with the new CHOD and use our assistance programs as a lever to secure progress on our key priorities: expanding Bulgarian participation in overseas deployments and increasing the number and quality of deployable and NATO-interoperable Bulgarian military assets across all three services.

McEldowney